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BURROUGHS AS BERGSONIST

BY NORMAN FOERSTER

I

"THINK you the man of science does not also find God? that Huxley and Darwin and Tyndall do not find God, though they may hesitate to use that name? Whoever finds truth finds God, does he not? Whoever loves truth loves God!" In these words, typical of *The Light of Day*, John Burroughs, at the beginning of the present century, placed himself in all candor among the scientific philosophers. Literature and religion, he announced, are on the wane, while science is young, is "now probably only in the heat of its forenoon work." The future belongs to science.

But the scientific enthusiasm of *The Light of Day* could not last. Long before this book was published, Burroughs had insisted upon "love" as the motivating power behind the scientific study of the universe; and even in his praise of reason as the light of day banishing the mists of superstition, even in his cordial welcoming of the young giant to whom the future belongs, there were overtones of dissatisfaction and rebellion that were later to become the dominant theme. *The Light of Day* was no sooner published than it was outgrown. Thirteen years later, when the shadows of a long life were deepening apace, the ambitious young giant of the modern world seemed to possess sinister as well as creative forces. Science was now conceived, not as in the heat of his morning labors, but as having reached the meridian. "In the Noon of Science" (*The Summit of the Years*) expresses a grudging acceptance of the achievements of natural science, and even more disillusion as to its value in interpreting life. The author has passed from the blithe assumption: "Think you the man of science does not also find God?" to the patronizing reminder: "Let us give physical science its due." The

militant intellectualism of a Huxley has lapsed into the melancholy and the recurring bewilderment of the finer spirits of our epoch; "I too," says Burroughs, "at times feel the weary weight of the material universe as it presses upon us in a hundred ways in our mechanical and scientific age." Looking down from the summit of the years he perceives that knowledge comes but wisdom lingers—that railroad, automobile, and aeroplane have not brought the arch-gods in place of the half-gods; that our mastery of the forces of nature has all but led to their mastery of us (allusively quoting Emerson, he sees now, he says, that "we cannot vault into the saddle of the elemental forces and ride them and escape the danger of being ridden by them"); that the finer qualities of the civilization of the Old World are a legacy from the pre-scientific age; that the scientific age when only slightly unchecked, as here in the New World, has produced a civilization "the ugliest and most materialistic that any country or age ever saw"; that in the most pretentious researches of science, those into the nature of life and consciousness, which it has sought to explain in terms of physics and chemistry, scientific investigation is "at the end of its tether"; that whereas material or logical truths are intellectually discerned, spiritual truths are spiritually discerned—"All questions that pertain to the world within us are beyond the reach of science." For all these facts, pointed out with salutary emphasis, science is not responsible, says Burroughs, but man himself: a truth to be remembered in our reaction against natural science. Surely science cannot be other than altogether beneficent when beneficently used. But it must be used to serve, not to domineer, the spiritual values of life. "Where there is no vision," says Burroughs, "no intuitive perception of the great fundamental truths of the inner spiritual world, science will not save us. In such a case our civilization is like an engine running without a headlight.

No, the physical light of day cannot illuminate the profound inner being of man; it leaves it dark as the darkest night. Illumination, at best a glimmering illumination, is obtainable only through the searching light of the spirit. "We must transcend physical science to reach the spiritual and grasp the final mystery of life." Science finds no meaning in such pregnant utterances as Goethe's "There is a

universe within thee as well " or Christ's "The kingdom of heaven is within you." Science may help us endlessly in understanding our physical life and enhancing our well-being, but it cannot help us in understanding our souls—"we must look to the great teachers and prophets, poets and mystics."

In a sense, this is not a new conclusion in Burroughs's work; the distinction, though blurred, is already present in *The Light of Day*. What is new is the application of the distinction. Formerly, Burroughs had looked to certain poets, chief of all Whitman, for help in understanding the soul; yet, with his scientific temper, he could not be convinced of anything like *authority* in Whitman. His feelings responded, rather than his mind, and the mind, with Burroughs, whatever he may say, is central. So, despite of Whitman's influence, he had continued to think in terms of natural science. But in his later work, beginning with *Time and Change*, he has found, or believes he has found, the authority wanting in the poets, the ground for accepting the validity of intuitive rather than scientific perception. The rapture of science, a tame equivalent for the French Revolution that made it bliss for democratical poets to be alive, had passed into something not far from disillusion, when M. Bergson, student of science and technical philosopher, no mere *littérateur* dallying with the emotions, swam into his ken and gave to Burroughs's secret tendencies a sanction altogether unlooked for. What he had wanted to believe, he now found it possible to believe. He came under the spell of Bergson, according to Miss Barrus, in the summer of 1911; and in the four volumes immediately succeeding, Bergson's influence is fundamental (*Time and Change*, 1912, *The Summit of the Years*, 1913, *The Breath of Life*, 1915, *Under the Apple-Trees*, 1916). While the scientists in the main have denounced Bergson, John Burroughs has become his disciple; the Huxley of *The Light of Day* has become the Bergson of *The Summit of the Years*. Bergson is the great reconciler; in him literature, science, and philosophy are no longer separate approaches to reality, but one. Whereas Herbert Spencer saw everything in the light of science alone, Henri Bergson envisages life in the light that never was on sea or land. He likewise goes beyond the far-seeing Emerson, in being "the friend and aider of those who would see with the

spirit and enter into the mystery of creation through intellectual sympathy and intuition, instead of making the vain attempt to do so through the logical and scientific understanding." He transforms the mirage of most of the spiritual strivings of the past into reality, permits the man of science (me, John Burroughs), without ceasing to be a man of science, to retain such words as "soul," "spirit," "creation," and "spontaneity" "as standing for real truths in the total scheme of things." He gives the dignity of science to spiritual perception.

On these terms Burroughs is content to follow Bergson in his degradation of the intellect, accepting his assertion, along with the italics, that "*the intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life.*" The intellect may, indeed, comprehend the physical order, by which it has been formed, but never the vital order. Life itself, the vital order, can be grasped only through intuition, through sympathetic immersion in pure duration. By projecting ourselves within life, "we shall escape from the bondage of the mechanistic view into the freedom of the larger truth of the ceaseless creative view; we shall see the unity of the creative impulse which is immanent in life and which, 'passing through generations, links individuals with individuals, species with species, and makes of the whole series of the living one immense wave flowing over matter.'" Here at last, thinks John Burroughs, is a conception of the "four-fifths of life outside of science" which a modern man may accept. And he may accept it with joy. Bergson exhilarates like a bath or a long walk. He shows—does he not?—that all life is divine, that matter is spiritualized, as Whitman had asserted long before. After Bergson we are free, as we were not quite free after Whitman, to live in the certainty of the immanence of spirit in nature, mingling with it in joyous company, knowing the soil and the spaces of the sky friendly not chilly, gazing back fearlessly down the long road by which man has ascended past all the perils of geologic time, wondering ecstatically at the miracle of the creative process as it lurches forward without a goal. Remote indeed, now, is the thoughtless ornithological ardor of *Wake-Robin*; remote the keen zest for a detective understanding of nature functioning; remote, even, the geologic and biologic studies once so absorbing. Something of each remains, of course,

partly because old age is retrospective, and the sugar-bush of the farm and the first hooded warbler in the woods will never be effaced, and the landscape of the old days necessarily wears a new aspect after years of brooding over its geology and biology; yet, as Burroughs says in *Field and Study*, "When I take a walk now, thoughts of natural history play only a secondary part; I suspect it is more to bathe the spirit in natural influences than to store the mind with natural facts." More and more, as he has mused on the vital order, the physical fact has yielded less pleasure and meaning, while the inner fact, the vital impulse expressing itself in a stream of novelties, has fascinated him. As a boy on the farm, he turned eagerly from the human world of work and character to the influences of an infinitely curious and beautiful outer nature; and as an old man, he is still immersed in these influences. They are richer, as the man is richer, but they still proceed from the enchantments of outer nature rather than from the inner life of the spirit.

II

If the two, nature and spirit, are indeed one, as Burroughs believes, there has been a genuine advance in his career from poetic observation to scientific study, to spiritual insight. But the spiritual insight of Burroughs is clearly not that of the sages, his own Emerson included, who have invariably assumed a dualism that he denies. Science, according to Burroughs, has rendered impossible the conception of any sort of dualism in creation; "when the man of science seeks to understand and explain the world in which we live, he guards against seeing double, or seeing two worlds instead of one, as our unscientific fathers did—an immaterial or spiritual world surrounding and interpenetrating the physical world, or the supernatural enveloping and directing the natural." He is at a loss, he admits a little naively, to account for this "mythopoetic tendency" of our unscientific fathers, unless, perchance, it served a good purpose, along with indubitably bad effects, in the evolution of mankind. But he has no doubt that it is high time that we discard the superstitions of dualism, since "hedge or qualify as we will, man is a part of Nature. . . . Can there be anything in the universe that is not of the universe? Can we make two or three out of the one?"

It will not serve to remind Burroughs, who respects the natural but not the human past, that Christ did so, that Plato and Aristotle did so, that Dante and Milton did so, that all the wise men in the history of mankind have done so, basing their conviction on the very nature of consciousness itself; for Burroughs will answer that science has now shown that consciousness itself has a "physiological origin," "that the spiritual has its root in the carnal." Somewhere on the long road, he says picturesquely, man picked up his brain, and somewhere, later, he developed his ethical system. We shall look in vain in nature, not only for reason and holiness, but also for our ethical principles; she is non-moral, her needs are all physical; while we have her curiosity, jealousy, sex love, fear, etc., she knows nothing of our "exclusively human" emotions and impulses such as awe, veneration, humility, self-sacrifice, shame, and modesty. These human properties began "*de novo* in him only as the wing began *de novo* in the bird, or the color began *de novo* in the flower," and were built up by men through the contacts of society. "They are the fruit of the social aggregate."

Yet the scientific attitude that forbids our seeing double results, as Burroughs himself confesses, in fundamental contradictions. "I am aware," he says, "that two ideas, or principles, struggle in my mind for mastery. One is the idea of the super-mechanical and the super-chemical character of living things; the other is the supremacy and universality of what we call natural law." The super-natural point of view springs from his "literary habit of mind"; the natural, from his "scientific bent." Hence the reader is to expect "obvious contradictions." And he will find them. On the one hand Burroughs asserts that nature is simply man viewed externally, that we may come to know ourselves through a study of her; on the other, that we have exclusively human traits of the highest importance which cannot be studied in her. On the one hand he regards these peculiarly human traits as the most valuable possessions of humanity, and on the other is well pleased, with Wordsworth (whom he quotes),

. to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my *moral* being.

On the one hand he insists upon nature and spirit as an inalienable unity, rejecting the reality of dualism, and on the other completely "lives in *two separate* compartments of his being at different times." Nor are these to be regarded as verbal or superficial contradictions, as a concrete instance will show: Burroughs's conception of the great war of 1914. War itself, we may note in passing, he views as a beneficent institution ("There must be something that vastly more than offsets the brutal element in it"), while believing also that it is a maleficent institution that the scientific spirit will eventually exorcise. In the World War Germany, who had led the rest of the world in our modern cultivation of science "as if it were our salvation," found that "the gods of science" were on her side. Did this fact place Burroughs too on her side? Not in the least; it only made him fear deeply that she would win and impose a Germanized world upon us, and it did not prevent his warm advocacy of the cause of the Allies, who had "the gods of the moral law" on their side, on the surprising ground that "our blended inheritance from Greece and Judea and the meditative Orient" was at stake — "the spirit that begat literature, poesy, art, music." The modern Germany of science, of vital impulse, and grandiose idealism, though it is the state that his thinking leads to, is after all not the state that Burroughs wants. In the hour of crisis, he rallies to the defense of the dualistic, humanistic tradition of the Orient and the Mediterranean to which, in his mode of life and his writings, he has given scant attention and praise. The votary of the gods of science is at heart, with all the sages, a worshipper of the gods of the moral law. He finds that he must distinguish in practice, if not in theory, between nature and man.

In theory, however, he returns on every page to the irrefragable unity of things, and to the bland optimism that accompanies this conception whenever it is emphasized. "It is the best possible world." He is in love with it, aye, with "its storms and earthquakes, its wars, its famines, and contagious diseases." Man is a mere speck, presently to be wiped out when the stars cool off; he is only "the insect of a summer hour"; he is brother to the apples that nature drops from the tree in the process of thinning—we, the dropped apples, must think of the tree, and be happy. Only so shall we enter fully into the wonder of life. The won-

der!—here perhaps we have the key to the emotional compartment of John Burroughs. It is all so curious, so endlessly curious, this world we happen to find ourselves in. What we learn, far from diminishing its curiosity, but adds to it more and more. The doctrine of evolution, instead of undermining the wonder and mystery of life, has increased it immeasurably. So much to learn, so much to enjoy—how could one wish for a better world? Study the wing of a butterfly, the habits of the chipmunk, the long road of the past up which they have marched as man has marched: are greater wonders conceivable? “Transport yourself in imagination away from the earth to the vacancy of the interstellar regions. Can you convince yourself that there would be no over and no under, no east and no west, no north and no south?” “If one rode upon a meteorite rushing toward the earth, would one have the sensation of falling?” Is there no cause in these things, in all things, for infinite wonder? Pitiably indeed is the state of the man who was not endowed with the faculty of wonder or whose sense of wonder has been blunted by use. “I think I was born under happy stars, with a keen sense of wonder, which has never left me, and which only becomes jaded a little now and then.” As one might expect, the wonder of a scientific temper like that of Burroughs leads from the present to the past rather than to the future. The future a Bergsonian must regard as completely unknowable; but if nothing may be predicted, much may be recollected. “As life nears its end with me,” writes Burroughs in *The Breath of Life*, “I find myself meditating more and more upon the mystery of its nature and origin.” Not man as he is, still less man as he might be, is the subject of scientific wonder, but man as he was when he was not man at all. Nothing can be more wonderful, to such a man, than to turn the ancient soil with a spade and lay bare the geologic ages—an abyss opens up that is indeed calculated to swallow his “identity,” and everything else. If wonder and religion are the same, as Burroughs assumes; if an intellectually imaginative response to nature carried to the point of an emotional self-annihilation is spirituality, then unquestionably John Burroughs is to be ranked among the major prophets of the soul.

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